

# Foucault Studies

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ISSN: 1832-5203

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22439/fs.vi29.6209>

*Foucault Studies*, No. 29, 1-5, April 2021

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## INTRODUCTION

### **Special Issue: *Confessions of the Flesh* – Guest Editors' Introduction**

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In February 2018, almost 35 years after Michel Foucault's death, *Histoire de la sexualité 4, Les Aveux de la chair* was finally published in France. The book, dedicated to analysing the sexual ethics built up by the Church Fathers, made available for the first time a crucial part of Foucault's research on *History of Sexuality*. Last February, the English translation of the book by Robert Hurley was published by Pantheon Books. We are pleased to present this special issue devoted to Michel Foucault's *History of Sexuality vol. 4, Confessions of the Flesh*. The special issue includes original contributions that, from a variety of perspectives, investigate the main topics studied by Foucault in the final volume of *History of Sexuality* (e.g., confession, virginity, desire). We hope this special issue will contribute to the reception of Michel Foucault's long-awaited book; a reception inaugurated by the conference *Foucault, les Pères, le sexe* held at the Université Paris 1 – Panthéon-Sorbonne and the Bibliothèque nationale de France in February 2018. A further development of the contributions presented in that conference will be published in a forthcoming volume, *Foucault, les Pères, le sexe. Autour des Aveux de la chair*, edited by Philippe Büttgen, Philippe Chevallier, Agustín Colombo, and Arianna Sforini (Éditions de la Sorbonne, June 2021).

Many of the contributions included in this special issue were first presented as papers at the Harvard Colloquium of Intellectual History, "Confessions of the Flesh: Michel Foucault's final volume of the History of Sexuality", held at the Minda de Gunzburg Center of European Studies at Harvard University in December 2019. We would like to thank the organisers, Anabelle Kim and Julian Bourg, and also the participants of the Colloquium for giving us the chance to work together and discuss Foucault's *Confessions*, which, at that time, was not yet translated into English.

## ORIGINAL ARTICLES

The special issue includes five original articles.

Philippe Büttgen's (Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne, France) article "Foucault's concept of confession" starts by focusing on the rich semantic ambivalence of the French word "aveu" and its specific meaning as compared to the English terms "avowal" and "confession". Büttgen's discussion of the "challenges of translation" leads into an analysis of confession as a key concept through which we can understand the intellectual evo-

lution of the last Foucault. Büttgen first notes “Foucault’s relative failure to bring together the various dimensions of confession as confession of sins *and* confession of faith in early Christianity”. Foucault prioritises the confession of sins over the confessions of faith. Consequently, Büttgen claims, Foucault was not able to fully account for the illocutionary force of the creed’s statements, “with all the religious and political implications this ‘force’ carries with itself, and the type of attitude these statements imply towards one’s belief”. The analysis of the interplay between the two aforementioned dimensions of confession leads Büttgen to focus on the “duty of truth”, as Foucault specifically developed this notion in *Confessions of the Flesh*. By drawing upon the problem of the “duty of truth”, Philippe Büttgen sheds new light on the transitional role that Christian confession plays in the final Foucault and his problematisation of *parrhesia* in ancient philosophy. In doing so, he reveals the extent to which “Foucault’s discovery of the illocutionary force of statements (or, to put it in other words, of the power of declarations) stood in a complex relationship with his approach to early Christianity”.

Lynne Huffer’s (Emory University, USA) paper, “Foucault’s queering virgins: an unfinished history in fragments” investigates Foucault’s research on virginity through the rhetorical figure of “chiasmus”. In Huffer’s view, the structure of chiasmus illustrates the movement of self-conversion (*metanoia*) involved in the practice of virginity: “*Metanoia* is the experience of chiasmus, from the Greek, ‘crossing,’ from *chiazō*, a verb: ‘to shape like the letter X’”. The analysis of virginity through the figure of the chiasmus leads Huffer to focus on Foucault’s account of counter-conducts. This is because the rotation of chiasmic inversion also describes “‘the movement of thought and practice’ that impels what Foucault describes as counter-conduct”. Drawing upon chiasmus as a conceptual tool, Huffer argues for an ethics and a politics of counter-conduct in Foucault by showing that the chiasmic structure frames not only *Confessions of the Flesh* but all of Foucault’s work “as a fragmented, self-hollowing speech haunted by death and the dissolution of the subject”. The chiasmus reveals how, as apophatic speech, Foucault’s work always shifts and comes back to us modified in a deathly movement of eternal recurrence. Through the posthumous publication of *Confessions of the Flesh*, Foucault returns to us, speaking from the limits, placed on the threshold of life and death. In doing so, the book itself can be conceived as a reading experience through which we can be transformed.

James Bernauer begins his article, “Fascinating Flesh: Revealing the Catholic Foucault”, by recollecting some of the occasions in which he felt the sense of “bewilderment” that both lies at the source of Foucault’s intellectual project and is the effect that project so often provokes in us. These recollections include attending Foucault’s lectures in 1980 at the Collège de France, *The Government of the Living*, where it was clear that Foucault was exploring “spiritual continents” that both he and his audience were in many ways unprepared to fully appreciate and where the sense of bewilderment was palpable in the lecture hall. But it is this sense of bewilderment – both surprise and amusement – that Bernauer worries we are likely to miss when we approach the new volume with our ready-made interpretations in hand. In our effort to demonstrate how

this newly published work fits into an intellectual itinerary we are all too familiar with, we risk overlooking the rich and strange experience of the flesh Foucault found in the early Christian Fathers. Foucault's painstaking account of the ancient art of virginity, which was so central to the early Christians, exemplifies the extent to which this experience remains irreducible to the terms we are likely to impose upon it. Rather than the familiar categories of desire, law, and repression, or even of the struggle of the flesh and the spirit, Bernauer argues that the art of virginity testifies to an experience of the flesh "that is both incarnational (witnessing to godly presence) and seditious (reminding us of our fallen state)". He speculates that Foucault's own bewilderment in face of this experience was a major motive driving him to reconceive his plans for the *History of Sexuality* series. Perhaps the extensive and ever-growing scholarly commentary on Foucault's work that has elucidated his project in so many ways has, nevertheless, obscured important dimensions of that work that do not mesh easily with well-established categories. In particular, Bernauer alerts us to the fact that Foucault's abiding and profound engagement with religious experience, and in particular Christian and Catholic experience, has been too often overlooked or reduced to that familiar set of categories – pastoral power, confessional technologies, desire, and repression. He argues that engaging with the religious experience evoked by the "Catholic Foucault" in all of its richness and strangeness may lead us to surprising new insights into forms of subjectivity and counter-conduct, as it did for Foucault.

In "Foucault's Keystone: *Confessions of the Flesh*: How the Fourth and Final Volume of *The History of Sexuality* Completes Foucault's Critique of Modern Western Society", Bernard Harcourt makes the bold claim that *Confessions of the Flesh* does nothing less than provide us the "long awaited completion" of Foucault's "intellectual project". Harcourt figures this intellectual project as centred on the critique of the modern forms of governing that culminate in neoliberal governmental rationality. This project took shape in Foucault's studies of the relations of power and knowledge in works such as *Discipline and Punish* and *The History of Sexuality vol 1*. When Foucault turned to ancient Greek practices for constituting ethical subjects of sexual pleasures (*aphrodisia*), many readers were disappointed because it appeared to them as if he abandoned the politically relevant study of power. But Foucault's turn to the practices of ethical subjectivity in his final period, Harcourt argues, does not represent a repudiation or displacement of the earlier work on relations of power and knowledge but rather continues it. Foucault's previous studies had shown the extent to which subjects are effects of the constituting work of technologies of power-knowledge relations. These studies also led him to the insight that the dimension of subjectivity could not be fully reduced to the functions of the other two dimensions. The critical genealogy of modern forms of governing, then, cannot be complete until subjectivity is taken fully into account not only as an effect of the first two, power and knowledge, but also as a dimension of experience interrelated with them though irreducible to them. Harcourt argues that *Confessions of the Flesh* completes Foucault's project by showing us the sources of modern subjectivity in the ancient arts of the self that the early Christians developed around the experience of the flesh and

sexual desire. This final volume of the *History of Sexuality* series culminates in Foucault's reading of Augustine, which, Harcourt argues, provides the final piece of the critical project. It is in Augustine that the juridical subject of rights emerges out of a reflection on the ethics of sexual relations in the context of the marriage relation. This juridical subjectivity will come to play a key role in the formation of the modern governmental configuration. In this way, Harcourt claims, *Confessions of the Flesh* closes the circle, showing how the analysis of the history of sexuality and the genealogy of the practices by which individuals constituted themselves as ethical subjects of sexual desire and pleasure gives rise to the juridical subject that eventually will become integrated into modern forms of governing the self and others.

In "What is a desiring man?", Agustín Colombo (F.R.S – FNRS, Université catholique de Louvain, Belgium) investigates the *History of Sexuality's* key concept of "desiring man" in light of *Confessions of the Flesh*. In order to do so, he analyses Foucault's diagnosis of the development of "the analytic of the subject of concupiscence" by Christianity, which closes *Confessions of the Flesh*. As he shows, the "principle of desiring man" on which the "modifications" of *The History of Sexuality* pivots constitutes a further elaboration of "the analytic of the subject of concupiscence". The analysis of the two main components of "the analytic of the subject of concupiscence" (i.e., John Cassian's hermeneutics of thoughts and Augustine's account of libido) shows that Foucault's diagnosis proves to be problematic. This is because Cassian's and Augustine's different accounts of both concupiscence and the human condition complicates the interplay of these components. These problematic aspects of Foucault's diagnosis of the Christian elaboration of "the analytic of the subject of concupiscence" allows us to grasp the extent to which the *History of Sexuality* project was prematurely curtailed by Foucault's death. However, it also reveals the crucial importance that the publication of *Confessions of the Flesh* has. If, as it seems, Foucault's diagnosis of the "principle of desiring man" proves to be problematic, can we affirm that this principle was developed within the Christian experience of the flesh? If not, then when and how was this principle elaborated? Did Christianity build up the idea that the truth of individuals, what individuals "are", should be deciphered through desire? The final volume of *History of Sexuality* actually seems to reopen the main genealogical hypotheses of Foucault's whole project. In doing so, the book suggests that the role that Christianity plays within *History of Sexuality* should be reconsidered. A possible new line of investigation regarding Augustine's perspective on desire as a matter of "identity" is suggested in the conclusion.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENT

We would like to thank *Foucault Studies* editorial board, especially Sverre Raffnsøe and Daniele Lorenzini, for their support and for having received with enthusiasm, from the beginning, the idea of dedicating a special issue to Foucault's *Confessions of the Flesh*. We want to express our gratitude to *Foucault Studies* Managing editor, Signe Macholm Müller, for her excellent work. We would also like to thank *Foucault Studies* staff involved in the preparation of the front cover of this special issue. Finally, we are immensely grate-

ful to the authors who accepted participating in this special issue. Without the commitment and the extraordinary work of all these people, this special issue would not have been possible.